

Come to the Table

A reflection on the practice of open communion
at saint benedict's table

Jamie Howison

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 **saint benedict's table**
a worshipping community, rooted in an ancient future

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The first draft of this paper was written during a two-week study leave at The General Theological Seminary, New York, in January 2007. It is quite fitting then, that two of my key sources/dialogue partners are on the faculty at General. In particular, I enjoyed a long and searching conversation with Dr John Koenig, whose book, *The Feast of the World's Redemption* played a key role in my wrestling with the New Testament sources. While I suspect Dr Koenig will not agree with all of my conclusions, I trust that he will find my engagement with his work to be both respectful and honest.

Due to our conflicting schedules, I was not able to share such a conversation with James Farwell. I suspect that if I had, I might have ended up working even harder to address his objections to the practice of open table. As it was, his very fine paper “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of ‘Open Communion’” challenged me greatly, and I found again and again that I was in a position of needing to respond to his deep and legitimate concerns. While I am quite sure that Dr Farwell will have strong disagreement with my conclusions, I do hope that he finds that I have not been dismissive of his views.

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Foreword

I grew up in a faith tradition where the “celebration of the Lord’s supper” was strictly a memorial event – and a rather dull one at that. Though our gatherings were generally lively and engaged, once a month I’d enter the sanctuary and see that dreaded table in front of the pulpit, set and draped with a white cloth, and my heart would sink. “Today’s service will be twenty minutes longer,” I’d think. Twenty minutes of rote communal recollection during which I would earnestly attempt, usually unsuccessfully, to conjure appropriate sorrow for my sins and corresponding gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice. I needed no convincing of either, but somehow this particular ritual always seemed unnecessarily laborious.

Years later, at a conference, I heard the liturgical theologian Robert Webber exclaim, “Are you faithful? Flee to the Eucharist! Are you a sinner? Flee to the Eucharist! Are you sick? Lonely? Hopeless? Flee to the Eucharist!” He went on to recall the time a homeless alcoholic walked in off the street and made his way straight to the communion rail. Robert did not hesitate to serve him. His response to the criticism that followed was, “Where better might a homeless sinner be than at the communion rail?” I’ve been fleeing to it since.

These days, the Lord’s Supper is not an intrusion on my spiritual life but rather its very centre. I gather around the communion table with others as conflicted and disintegrated as I, simply receiving what Christ wants to give – feeding on him so that we might live. It is at the Eucharist that I realize I so desperately want us to live, and I am convinced my longing doesn’t originate with

me but rather in the One who is life itself.

Jamie Howison's dialogical wisdom, something quite rare in my experience, is gathered equally from his honest participation in the common journey as one of the folks, as well as his diligent academic work and reflection. Thus a faith both well-reasoned and passionately lived is expressed comfortably in his gifted calling as a patient pastor, fierce priest and artful liturgist.

Under Jamie's leadership, the practice of welcoming everyone at saint benedict's table is neither born of sentimentality nor of mere innovation. Rather, it emerges from a rooted calm and engaged trust in the ongoing story of the Lover and the Beloved, both of which lend this book the quality of a gift offered freely and respectfully, even shyly, to the Church.

Steve Bell
singer/songwriter

Author

Jamie Howison is a priest of the Anglican Church and the founding pastor of saint benedict's table, a missional congregation of the Diocese of Rupert's Land in Winnipeg. A graduate of the University of Winnipeg and of Trinity College, Toronto, he serves as a member of the Primate's Theological Commission of the Anglican Church of Canada. Throughout his twenty years of ordained ministry, he has understood writing to be an important part of his priestly vocation, and has contributed to a variety of publications including *Sojourners*, *The Anglican Journal*, *Esprit* and *Canada Lutheran*, as well as to the collection *Get Up Off Your Knees: preaching the U2 catalogue* published by Cowley Publications.



Background

OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES it has become increasingly common in Anglican parishes to see printed in the Sunday leaflet some sentence such as “All baptized Christians are welcome to receive communion.” While some parishes have quietly dropped the word “baptized,” or even the phrase “baptized *Christians*,” from the leaflet’s invitational sentence, in most instances there has been a lack of deeper theological reflection on the meaning of this shifting practice.

As James Farwell observes in his essay “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus,” “A handful of high-profile parishes, in conscientious defiance of the canons of the Episcopal Church that restrict communion to the baptized, have undertaken the practice and inspired a number of parishes to do the same.”¹ While one can make a coherent case that organizational change and development are often sparked through local practice and innovation, this only makes sense - and only has integrity - if that innovation is shared and reflected upon openly and widely.

This book represents an invitation to reflect on the experience of one worshipping community which, from its beginnings, has practiced open table. Along with the conventional theological and biblical sources, I will draw on the experiences of our

¹ James Farwell, “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of ‘Open Communion,’” *Anglican Theological Review* Vol. 86, #2, Spring 2004, p. 215.

community members, reflected both in written responses to a simple question - “How would you describe your experience of the practice of ‘open table’ at saint benedict’s table?” - and in the lyric content of music written for use in worship. In this study, the writers of lyrics are credited by name, while responses to the question are followed by the initials of the respondent.

By way of background, saint benedict’s table is designated as a mission of the Diocese of Rupert’s Land in the Anglican Church of Canada. While we have had this official canonical status since October 2004, the community began to be birthed in the spring of 2003, when a small group of a dozen or so people began to meet bi-weekly for Sunday evening worship.

In part inspired by the so-called “emergent church” movement,² this group was gathered around a desire to explore the possibility of forming a worshipping community both rooted in the liturgical and theological resources of Anglicanism and open to new expressions which flow from that tradition. Borrowing a phrase from Robert Webber, we began to describe ourselves as being “rooted in an ancient-future.”³

It is notable that right from the start our worship, which uses a simple liturgy adapted from the Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*, was centred around the table. So much so that when, in August 2003 we made the decision to move to weekly gatherings on an ongoing basis, the choice of the word “table”

² The term “emergent church” has become somewhat problematic for us, as we have watched a whole industry crop up to market all things required to help reinvent local churches as “emergent.” Add to that the relative thinness of much of the theology of its leading proponents, and we have found it best to avoid the term in our self-description.

³ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1999).

in our name was both spontaneous and unanimous. Further, that St Benedict was chosen as the patron was due in part to the Benedictine emphasis on hospitality; on welcoming each guest as Christ.

It is also notable that the seeds for our current practice of an open table were effectively sown at those first few informal gatherings. Of our original circle of a dozen people, only five were Anglican, with all of the others coming from various Anabaptist and/or evangelical church backgrounds. Even as our numbers increased – there were 25 in attendance at our fifth gathering, and an average of 45 after less than a year of weekly liturgies – we drew predominantly from traditions which do not practice infant baptism.

The first question we faced had to do with whether or not we would admit to communion those few children who had been baptized as infants, yet deny those who had not. This was quickly followed by a second question, brought on by the fact that many evangelical and/or Anabaptist Christians have not in fact been baptized. In part, this is because baptism is often tied to the joining of a particular congregation, and it is not uncommon for people to spend years as an “adherent” before deciding to join as a full member.⁴

Further, in many instances, there is in that tradition a strong sense that adult baptism marks an end point – almost a settling down – in one’s spiritual pilgrimage, and many younger evangelicals simply are not prepared to take that step. Included in this latter group are people active in their church, and in

⁴ In one instance of which we became aware, full membership requires a commitment to participation in a weekly home group and a monthly open meeting. Some choose to remain adherents because such a time commitment is simply not feasible. I have also recently been made aware of a particular branch in the Mennonite tradition that withholds baptism until after marriage.

some cases theologically educated at a Bible college or even a seminary.

In raising the question of open table for this paper, one respondent observed that, “from my evangelical days, baptism is not viewed as inherently necessary for regeneration,” and this would seem to represent the normative view within that tradition’s mainstream.

Combining the numbers of these two groups - the unbaptized children and the adults and adolescents who have not yet requested baptism – roughly 20% of the people involved in our opening year explorations would not have been invited to receive communion had we not practiced open table.

For a community that has formed so much of its identity around the table, this would have been a deep irony. Further, rather than being able to build and grow as an expression within the tradition, strict adherence to the Anglican tradition’s position on baptism and communion could have halted us in our tracks. Witness the following:

Being raised in an atheist household, I have somewhat recently become a Christian and have not been formally baptized. If I were not welcome to participate in a rite as central to the Christian faith as communion, I would feel disconnected from the community and all that it offers. (K.B.)

This respondent goes on to suggest that his substantial involvement in our Christian education programming has been largely an extension of his ability to fully participate in the worship life of the community. He even cites Stanley Hauerwas in his reflection on how he understands the church! In short, what this respondent begins to open up is the fact that this is not narrowly a pastoral issue, nor is it one of being merely friendly and nice, but has deep missiological and ecclesial textures as well. We will return to these ideas later in this book.

In these earlier stages, rather than putting forth a thoroughgoing position on open table, as is offered in the parish of St Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco, we opted for a less dramatic route. St Gregory's is clearly one of the "handful of high profile parishes" Farwell refers to as acting in "conscientious defiance of the canons of the Episcopal Church."⁵ The rationale for their practice of open communion is articulated in a paper by Richard Fabian, which is easily available on their website.⁶ Significantly, the altar at St Gregory's bears twin inscriptions, which proclaim the centrality of their table practice. From Luke 15:2 there is "This guy welcomes sinners and dines with them," while from Isaac of Ninevah comes the quote, "Did not the Lord share the table of tax collectors and harlots? Do not distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy. All must be equal in your eyes to love and to serve."

In the formative days of our community's life, a simple invitation was made in words to the effect that "This communion is not the property of the Anglican Church, but is for all of God's people; regardless of your denominational background you are welcome, though no one should feel obligated." This approach became even more appropriate when, around the time of our receiving official status as a mission, we moved to All Saints' Church in downtown Winnipeg, and students from the nearby Salvation Army college began to visit. The practice of open table enabled these Salvationist worshippers, who come from a tradition that does not practice baptism, to participate as their own conscience might allow.

⁵ Farwell, p. 215.

⁶ Richard Fabian, "First the Table, Then the Font," for the Association of Anglican Musicians, ©2002. www.saintgregorys.org/Resources_pdfs/FirsttheTable.pdf

On a slight tangent, one respondent who, with her family, has been part of our community for the past year, and who, prior to that had attended a Salvation Army corps, offered her reflection on the experience of visiting an Anglican parish in which baptism was *emphasized* as being the prerequisite for communion:

When the service of communion occurred, there we sat as a family in the second pew – active in our spiritual journey, committed to Christ, and beside my mother-in-law (in her Salvation Army uniform), who has spent over 40 years of her life in ministry – watching others break bread and drink wine together.

(S.J.-R.)

Current Practice and Pattern of Worship

WE HAVE CONTINUED OUR PATTERN of gathering in the evening on Sundays for eucharistic worship. All Saints' Church is of neo-Gothic design, configured with a high altar, chancel and rood screen, with fixed pews seating 450. Pews have been removed from the front, making possible the use of a nave altar. We use a small carved oak table, placed in front of the chancel stairs, as our altar, and our musicians are seated to the side by the pulpit, oriented toward the table. The presider sits in the front pew, oriented to the table along with the community. The lections are read from a lectern placed midway down the centre aisle, and the sermon is usually preached from the middle of that aisle at the front. Three lay ministrants join the presider during the *sanctus*, standing alongside the table. Communion is served to the community standing in a large circle around the table; or rather, a series of circles, as the space is not sufficient to make a circle large enough for the entire congregation. We continue to use a somewhat simplified version of the communion rite from the Canadian *Book of Alternative Services*. The basic liturgical text is reproduced in colour from hand-drawn illuminated originals, which vary seasonally.

In the space at the back of the nave is another table which also shapes who and what we are: the table of refreshment. Each week as worship closes, we invite people to gather at that table of hospitality and to share a bit of life over coffee and food. That the church is anchored by twin tables is not accidental,

for what the community does at one must be mirrored in the other.¹

Close to that hospitality table are large baskets for the fruit and vegetables that people bring as donations to the local soup kitchen. These four baskets, which are filled to overflowing each week, are brought forward (primarily by the children) with the bread and wine at the offertory and are placed at the base of the communion table. Again, this is not an accidental thing. When the community comes forward to feast at the table we see our symbolic offering in the name of the One who called the poor and the hungry blessed. The community is regularly reminded that we should not imagine that a few baskets of fruit will solve the world's hunger and absolve us from responsibility. The baskets are a sacramental thing – a prophetic act directed at ourselves – which keeps reminding us that to dare to feast at this table is to be made deeply, even uncomfortably, aware of the abiding hunger of the world.

The cumulative effect of this way of celebrating communion is to emphasize our common life together before God. Though certain people are entrusted with roles of leadership – lectors, intercessors, musicians, administrators and not least of all the presider, who is the sole person vested in worship – all are united in our orientation as a people *together* before God. The

¹ I am aware that both at St Gregory of Nyssa and at the now defunct Sunday evening “Emerge” liturgy at St Bartholomew’s in Manhattan, the refreshments are served from the communion table, which is an even more blatant way of connecting the table of communion to the other tables in our lives. Aside from Christmas Eve, when sherry and shortbread are served from our communion table at the end of the liturgy, we have found it more helpful to think in terms of the ways in which all of the tables at which we gather – including the table at the back of the nave, but also those in the coffee shops, in our homes, and at the local pub – mirror and echo the communion table.

open invitation to share in the bread and wine, quite literally around the table in community, is for many a point of entry - or *re-entry* for those who have found themselves distanced or alienated from the church of their upbringing - into this local manifestation of the Body of Christ. As the following observations from members of our community will suggest, there is certainly a personal dimension to this participation, but it is one set very much in a corporate context:

Gathering the community around the table reminds me that I am not alone and that it truly is God who has invited us to the table of our Lord. Receiving these gifts from members of the community reminds me that we are all called to be servants of God. (T.B.)

I have seen so many different people taking communion together and it is emotionally overwhelming sometimes. Even street people who sleep outside our church have attended our services and have come up to be served, holding a member's hand for support, and feeling welcome. (J.M.)

The offering of bread and wine one-to-one personalizes the experience, the common cup reinforces the communal aspect, and the offering of the elements by people other than a pastor/elder/deacon reminds us of the equality of all in Christ. (A.B.)

The free, open coming together at the communion table in front of the church to celebrate the death, resurrection and presence of Christ in the midst of us at that moment filled me with a deep sense of wonder, peace, joy and oneness with all people. There was no exclusion; neither was there any judgment; no prying into myself by other more mature Christians; no shame felt during confession, no sense of 'you don't belong because you are not the same as, or as good as, or as right as.' One requirement only - hunger. (M.D.)

These attestations would seem to challenge the rather sweeping

statement made by Linda Moeller in her essay, “Baptism: Rite of Inclusion or Exclusion?” “A Church that would recognize eucharist as an incorporating Sacrament over and against baptism has lost sight of one of the primary characteristics of the early church and the first Christians: community.”² Perhaps, though, where saint benedict’s table differs from the sort of church Moeller has in mind is connected to her choice of the phrase “over and against baptism.” The relationship between the two sacraments as it is understood and practiced in our context will be addressed later in this book.

Most Anglican communities could produce a list of testimonials with many elements analogous to these. In fact, most urban churches (and probably some suburban ones as well) quite probably have a story or two to tell about “the stranger” who joined them at communion, acting sacramentally to remind the community of who and what they are called to be. As Farwell notes, “no pastor in her right mind will deny communion to someone who has, in fact, arrived at the altar rail expecting to receive.”³

But what if the hospitable opening of the communion table is not merely a pastoral default setting, but rather a theologically informed choice? What if it is embedded in the very ethos of a church community, central to its identity as the Body of Christ?

I believe the open table is core to the mandate of this ministry and the people called to be there. It is disconcerting because it puts me smack dab in the midst of unpredictable grace and compassion (children distributing the elements?). I don't

² Linda Moeller, “Baptism: Rite of Inclusion or Exclusion?” in Paul V. Marshall and Lesley Northrup, eds. *Leaps and Boundaries: the Prayer Book in the 21st Century* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1977), p. 89.

³ Farwell, p. 217.

necessarily know from where or how the person next to me arrived at that place at that time. I do know that for whatever reason, each of us has come intentionally, feeling fully invited. I don't feel anyone is there because tradition or denomination or congregation is looming, watching (or counting) their presence at the table or judging whether they are worthy in some manner. (H.M-F.)

I like the fact that we are invited to come to the table no matter where we are in our journey of faith, rather than being invited only if we are 'worthy.' Somehow that defines the meaning of grace in a dynamic way for me. (A.B.)

*Pass the cup around
I can hardly speak a word,
And I am lost;
Pass the bread around
I cannot sustain myself,
The day is growing longer;
Every time I come back to this table
I think... I might believe.....*

*We might believe
We long to feast
We might believe...*

Jenny Moore
"Pass the Cup Around"

Yet, is open table a defensible practice, theologically and biblically, or is the most that can be hoped for a pastoral wink, fingers collectively crossed behind our vestments?

Biblical and Theological Considerations

AT RISK OF OVERSIMPLIFYING THE matter, when it comes to biblical reflection on this issue, there are, broadly speaking, two main streams that seem to feed the discussion:

1. a focus on the Gospel accounts of Jesus' table practice and teaching, often cited in support of the practice of open table, and;
2. a focus on the witness of Paul, and in particular on 1 Corinthians 10-12, generally read as supportive of the traditional understanding of the relationship between baptism and eucharist.

I will attempt to offer an overview of some of the material from each of the two streams – and I must be up-front in saying that I am interested in seeing how material related to both streams might offer support for a practice of open table. Then I will proceed to a consideration of two sections from the Acts of the Apostles, neither of which is normally thought of as being particularly eucharistic in focus.

1. Jesus' table practice

In his book, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, Norman Perrin argued that more than anything else it was Jesus' meal practice

“that gave very grave offense indeed to his contemporaries,”¹ ultimately leading to their desire to have him executed.

... Jesus welcomed these outcasts into table-fellowship with himself in the name of the Kingdom of God, in the name of the Jews’ ultimate hope, and so both prostituted that hope and also shattered the closed ranks of the community against their enemy.²

Clear echoes of this reading of Jesus’ practice of table fellowship are heard in Richard Giles’ book, *Always Open: Being an Anglican Today*:

(Jesus’) most significant and provocative prophetic act, repeated again and again, was to eat with ‘publicans and sinners,’ with the riff-raff, the outcasts, the untouchables. In so doing, he was attempting to make real and tangible the unconditional love of God for all his children; admission was no longer by ticket only.³

In this view, when one considers the many, many meals recorded in the gospels – including several which feature as the setting for resurrection appearances – as well as the various parables which take feasts and meals as at least part of their setting, one must almost inevitably concur with Perrin’s assessment that the meal lies at the heart of Jesus’ meaning and message.

Again and again, both in parable and in practice, the welcome to the table is shown as being contingent on nothing other than a willingness to show up. The concerns of ritual purity are

¹ Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1967), p. 102.

² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³ Richard Giles, *Always Open: Being an Anglican Today* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2004), p. 106-107.

shelved, as is any thought of the righteousness of behaviour; among others, Jesus dines with Zacchaeus, “causing the neighbours to grumble, saying, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’” (Luke 19:1-10); with the 5,000 (Luke 9:10-17, and parallels); with a Pharisee (Luke 11:37); with women (John 12:1ff). Among his many parables which feature meals, Jesus speaks of a wedding feast which is opened to “everyone you can find,” including, at least in Matthew’s version, “both good and bad” (Matt 22:1-10).

Commenting on this parable of the banquet, John Dominic Crossan writes, “What Jesus’ parable advocates, therefore, is an open commensality, an eating together without using table as a miniature map of society’s vertical discriminations and lateral separation.”⁴ For Crossan, the open meal stands as the defining prophetic enacted parable of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his view, if the church is to be at all faithful to Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God, it must shape itself in the terms of open “commensality;” an openness in meal hospitality as modeling an intentional disregard for social norms and rules that divide and segregate. Simply put, in this view Jesus is understood as the dinner host who demonstrates the most catholic of tastes in the construction of a guest list which includes “everyone you can find... both good and bad.”

It might be fairly protested that in the gospels Jesus is almost never portrayed as the host of the meals in which he participates, but rather as a kind of unsettlingly compelling dinner guest who manages to draw all sorts of people to share table together, including some clearly not invited, much less

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 69. Crossan makes use of the term “commensality,” which he defines as “the rules of tabling and eating as miniature models for the rules of association and socialization” (p. 68).

welcomed, by the actual host. That the host is sometimes pictured as being rather uncomfortable, even critical, of Jesus' indiscriminate practice in this regard (i.e. Luke 7:36ff) should give us pause.

The church's understanding of just who is to be included in our meals must be open to challenge by Jesus, whose very presence is able to subvert all our rules and decorum around just who belongs at the table. One might even want to say that for all the church talks about this being "the Lord's table," in practice it often seems that we are issuing the invitations and setting the terms of participation. It is at this point that we might need to remind ourselves of Jesus' unsettling and compelling character; that he is the one who by his very presence simply undoes our judgments.

In the gospels, there is one meal for which Jesus is very clearly the host, and that is the meal shared in the upper room on the night of his arrest. As it is presented in the three synoptic gospels, the last supper is indeed a meal for the insiders, and specifically for the twelve disciples. One could speculate that there may have been others present,⁵ but that is really only speculation, with no basis in the gospel narratives themselves.

And of course, this is not just *any* meal Jesus is hosting, but is rather the meal from which has flowed two millennia of the church's eucharistic life and practice. Put simply, if this one meal that Jesus himself hosts is a meal for the inner circle of his followers, does that set something of a precedent for restricting communion, to borrow Farwell's phrase, "to those who commit

⁵ I have a colleague in ministry who every year at his parish Maundy Thursday supper suggests that it is impossible to imagine that a group of thirteen men would have held such a meal without women present to at least prepare and serve the food!

themselves to anticipatory practice of the kingdom?”⁶ That in fact Jesus’ practice of general table fellowship might best be translated to warmly welcoming non-baptized guests and inquirers to our pot-luck suppers and coffee-hours, but not to full participation in the eucharist?

There is indeed considerable debate as to whether or not the sharing of food and of table fellowship implied an open sharing of communion in the early church. How was the relationship between the sharing of food and the partaking of communion understood in the early church, and what was their practice?

Moeller, who is not particularly supportive of the developing trend of practicing an open table, suggests that in the early church context, “The common experience of conversion and forgiveness offered by Jesus would have made it unimportant to distinguish rigorously between a eucharistic meal and an ordinary community meal.”⁷ Moeller’s point is reinforced by Robert Banks in his little book *Going to Church in the First Century*, which sets out in reconstructed narrative form a picture of the meal practices of the 1st century church. In the preface to the second edition of the book, Banks responds to the critics who had wondered at his placing of the protagonist of his story – a Gentile and, at least as the story opens, an entirely uninitiated non-believer – at the community’s meal as a full participant.

While it is disputable, for example, that an outsider could be present at the Lord’s Meal, I cannot myself see how such a person could in other ways participate in the meeting (1 Corinthians 14:16,24-25) yet be excluded from it without breaching laws of hospitality and denying them

⁶ Farwell, p. 224.

⁷ Moeller, pp. 83-84.

the possibility of a visual declaration of the gospel.⁸

According to this reading, in the church's earliest days its eucharistic community meals always had about them a missional character, with guests being invited to "taste and see that the Lord is good." John Koenig, on the other hand, takes the position that while Jesus' meal practices were in fact defining, both in his ministry and in the life of the early church, there is a legitimate distinction between the sharing of a meal with outsiders and the restriction of communion to the baptized.⁹

Here it is helpful to pay attention to the insights of Michael Welker when he observes that, "The acceptance of the community's enemies and of sinners, which is characteristic of the pre-Easter Jesus' practice of table fellowship, reaches an exemplary apex in Jesus' celebration of the last supper."¹⁰

⁸ Robert Banks, *Going to Church in the First Century* (Jacksonville, FL: Seed Sowers Christian Book Publishing, 1990), pp. 3-4. I am grateful that John Koenig drew this book to my attention. On one level, it is a very fine and readable resource for the Christian education of young people, but because it is based on Banks' scholarly work it also serves as a credible guide to the practices of the church of the apostolic age. See Banks' *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early Housechurches in their Historical Setting* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

⁹ John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), p. 213ff. Regarding any practice of open table in the early church, Koenig writes, "... we have found no evidence that visitors to eucharistic meals in New Testament times partook of or expected to partake of the ritual eating and drinking prior to baptism" (p. 254).

¹⁰ Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 72.

Given that it is a meal for the twelve disciples, how is it that “an exemplary apex” is reached in the last supper? For Welker, it has to do with the fact that Jesus extends the bread and cup both “to Judas Iscariot, who hands Jesus over, and to Peter, who betrays him.”¹¹

Once we perceive how holy communion unfolds against the background of the “night of self-giving and betrayal,” it becomes impossible to cast doubt upon the fundamental acceptance of sinners in the Supper. It is incompatible with the Supper to have human beings sitting in judgment over each other and deciding which supposedly righteous person is admitted to the Supper and which “unworthy” person is excluded. It is a total perversion of communion to turn it into a process of judgment by some persons over others, or to use it to support such an undertaking. The Supper is not a test case for the moral self-assertion of a community. It is not a religious opportunity to render or refuse moral or judicial recognition to other human beings.¹²

“Only Christ himself judges,” continues Welker, “so that the only possible exclusion from the celebration of the Supper is a *self-exclusion* [italics in original] oriented on the will of Christ.”¹³ Now it must be said that in his book Welker never quite gets to the place of directly addressing the subject of communion of the unbaptized, though his remarks about the communion of children – and here it should be noted that he is writing specifically of *baptized* children – are helpful: “The greatest possible number of persons participating in the Supper should know what the celebration of the Supper is about and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

how the Supper is celebrated in accordance with its identity.”¹⁴ Taken as a guide for a community practicing open table, this emphasizes a need for real clarity in teaching and in practice around what it is the community is doing – or striving to be open to – when it celebrates the eucharist.

There is actually one other situation in which Jesus is portrayed as something of a host for a meal, though it is certainly a less conventional form of *table* practice. The various accounts of the feeding of the 5,000 (Matt 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-15, as well as the additional feeding of the 4,000 in Mark 8:1-10 and Matt 15:32-39) all show Jesus as very much in charge of things, whether directly (“Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass,” Matt 14:19) or through the disciples (“Make the people sit down,” John 6:10). Of these various accounts, Gil Bailie writes:

Given the role of table fellowship in Jesus’ ministry, it is my view that it was not primarily the lateness of the hour that made the unexpected sharing of a meal necessary, but rather that Jesus decided to drive home the points he had been making in his preaching by inviting his audience to sit down then and there for the purpose of sharing a meal with those around them. The point of the feeding, in my opinion, was not food; it was the breaking down of religious and social barriers that Jesus had been challenging as spiritually inconsequential in his preaching. It was hands-on learning. It was practice for living in the kingdom.¹⁵

It almost goes without saying that the “religious and social barriers” to which Bailie refers were no small thing. To be

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁵ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), p. 214.

willing to sit down with a crowd of strangers and to partake of food of unknown provenance was, for this presumably largely Jewish crowd, all but shocking. Yet apparently Jesus, by force of his innate authority, was able to see those barriers toppled.

Crossan makes much – probably too much – of these narratives, linking the multiplied loaves and fishes to the various resurrection appearances which involve the eating of fish and bread. “It might be considered,” Crossan writes, “whether bread and fish for the crowd and abundant fragments left over is a better ritualization of Jesus’ own life than bread and wine for the believers with abundance now completely irrelevant.”¹⁶

The almost unimaginable abundance offered indiscriminately to all who were prepared to see past the barriers of convention and simply sit down to eat is, for Crossan, a far more compelling sign of the message of Jesus than is a closed table ritual of bread and wine. In his view, as the Jesus movement became the Christian church, its practice evolved away from the former toward an ever more narrow practice of the latter: “In memory of me, to be sure, but not real food, not open commensality, not for the crowds, and not with baskets filled left over.”¹⁷

Even more radically, Crossan is of the opinion that the story of the last supper and the communion practices which stem from it are actually the creation of the young church; that the early followers fashioned a ritualized meal inspired by Jesus’ practice of table fellowship which, over the course of a few decades, became open only to the baptized.¹⁸ This, of course,

¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 399.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

¹⁸ Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 68f.

is why Crossan finds the feeding of the multitudes to be a vastly more compelling and thoroughgoing demonstration of open “commensality” than is a last supper of bread and wine; so much so that he writes in some detail about the evidence for what he calls the “bread and fish Eucharists” of the earliest churches.¹⁹ To *not* open our meals – be they ritualized meals of bread and wine or perhaps less formalized table celebrations of the spirit and proclamation of Christ – is, following Crossan’s line of thought, simply not defensible.

While not alone in this sort of reading of the material, Crossan is hardly uncontroversial. It is striking, for instance, how little impressed he is that, within twenty years of the death of Jesus, Paul can write in some detail of the eucharistic practices of the church (1 Cor 11:17-34) – practices which Paul says he “received from the Lord,” presumably through Peter and the others during his first visit to Jerusalem sometime in the early to mid ‘30’s.²⁰ Crossan’s work is helpful in its demand that we see just how subversive was Jesus’ insistence that all be given a place in table fellowship – including both the outcasts and those, such as women and children, who were typically without status in an ancient context. Finally, however, it can make only a marginal case for shifting our own churches’ practices toward open table. After all, if one follows his suggestion that the eucharist is but a creation of the early church, and by design exclusive to the baptized insiders, does it make any sense to continue the practice by opening and widening it? Should we not follow Crossan’s thought to

¹⁹ Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. 398-404.

²⁰ Koenig, pp. 11-12. In his book, Koenig responds in some detail to the theories set forth by Crossan, Marcus Borg and Bruce Chilton, all of which are variations on the same theme, namely that the eucharistic practices of the early church are not directly rooted in a single “last supper” as presented in the synoptic gospels.

its logical conclusion, and move to replacing the ritualized and exclusive eucharist of bread and wine with something more akin to his “bread and fish eucharists?”

More helpful might be the sort of position advocated by Richard Fabian, one of the priests at St Gregory Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Citing John Koenig as one of its key sources, the force of Fabian’s paper, “First the Table, then the Font” is to argue that whatever restrictions the early church might have placed on the sharing of communion, the church of the 21st century should pay deeper attention to the “critical New Testament research [that] has uncovered a biblical foundation for church reform which our forebears could not see as we see today.”²¹ In this view, it is Jesus’ meal practice that should shape our thinking about who is invited to share in communion and not the rules and practices of the early church. Picking up on similar threads, Richard Giles finds it not at all surprising that such practices were so quickly submerged in the early church, as Jesus’ table practice, “was also deeply subversive to religious authority, and the Christian Church (no more than the Jewish hierarchy of Jesus’ day) has never been able to cope with it.”²²

This position finds some support in Howard Clark Kee’s essay, “From the Jesus movement toward the Institutional church.” Kee traces the shift, over 70 years, from an inclusive movement of charismatic origins – which included such radical innovations as women deacons, and which worked with very little by way of institutional structure or uniform rules – to churches that

²¹ Fabian, p. 1.

²² Giles, pp. 60-61.

were “socially, conceptually, and structurally” institutional.²³ It would not be hard to imagine that in their earliest phase these communities might well have invited unbaptized converts and even visitors to partake of communion, and that it was only later that the pattern of baptism as prerequisite for communion was formalized. To be sure, this “only later” is still very early; it is set out explicitly in both the *Didache* (95 C.E.) and in Justin Martyr (155 C.E.).

In short, while there is a broad consensus that the church must take seriously Jesus’ meal practices, there remains serious debate as to how that might have shaped eucharistic practices in the earliest years of the church’s life, and whether or not Jesus’ table hospitality can be used to justify the practice of open table in our own time.

2. Paul and the connection between baptism and communion

While certainly not the only Pauline material dealing with questions of communion and membership in the Body of Christ, 1 Corinthians 10-12 has featured prominently in the conversations regarding open table. In particular, the verses dealing with partaking in an “unworthy manner” (1 Cor 11:27-32) are especially significant, but so too are 10:14-22 (“we who are many are one body”), 12:12-31 (“in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”) and the blocks of material (11:17-26 and 11:33-34) that bracket the verses on unworthy reception.

The issue of worthy reception is one that has been raised often

²³ Howard Clark Kee, “From the Jesus Movement toward the Institutional Church,” in Robert W. Hefner, ed. *Conversion to Christianity* (University of California Press, 1993), pp. 47-64.

by people in saint benedict's table, particularly by those of evangelical and/or Anabaptist heritage. It seems a bit ironic that in church traditions that have a very low, strictly memorialist theology of communion, such emphasis on worthy reception is so strong. The issue is a daunting one, as Paul's words seem so very clear on the matter:

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. (1 Cor 11:27-29)

Paul then goes on to suggest that out of such unexamined participation in communion have come weakness, sickness and even death.

While there is nothing in this passage that suggests it is baptism that makes one worthy, Farwell is right to observe that, "there is certainly a complex logic of participation that suggests a certain way in which the meal is best approached."²⁴

But just what is that "certain way?" On the individual level, Paul is clearly concerned that people examine themselves, even judge themselves, before partaking. This is not, however, a case of lining up one's moral ducks in a nice, straight row, and thereby being deemed sufficiently righteous to participate. As Koenig suggests, in the case of the disciples, each time the bread and wine were shared, there would have been not only joy over the resurrection but also ongoing remorse over their various betrayals and denials of Jesus on the night of his arrest. "Every time they commemorated Jesus' death and resurrection at meals, these first followers would also recall his abundant

²⁴ Farwell, pp. 222-223.

mercy to them.”²⁵ “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table,” as the prayer of humble access from the *Book of Common Prayer* has it; “But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.” Any and all who come to the table are declared worthy to receive, but only by God’s abundant mercy, which is itself reflected in Jesus’ abundant mercy to his own fickle disciples.

Beyond the personal level, there is also very clearly a community issue at work here. The material on unworthy reception follows a section on abuses of the table fellowship in which some eat before all have arrived; in which some are filled and some get drunk, while others go hungry. Again, from Koenig:

From Paul’s point of view, the chief offense being committed at the Corinthian supper is that of publicly devaluing one’s less privileged brothers or sisters, which in turn devalues the congregation as a whole. “Do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” asks the apostle in 11:22. Far from structuring their eucharistic meals in a way that manifests unity and equality in Christ (10:16f.), some Corinthians are doing just the opposite. For the apostle, this abuse is far more than social indiscretion. It is, in fact, a hostile stance against God’s world-redeeming activity.²⁶

In the words of Michael Welker, “Instead of demonstrating mutual acceptance and justice in the celebration of the Supper, the perverted meal becomes a sign and demonstration of inequality and injustice!”²⁷ The crucial question for the Corinthians, then, would seem to be the one of who is left

²⁵ Koenig, p. 59.

²⁶ Koenig, p. 108.

²⁷ Welker, p. 78.

out or diminished? How has the supper become a sign of “inequality and injustice” and of disunity rather than of an ever-deepening unity as the Body of Christ?

In this sense, to “eat and drink without discerning the body” is really to have failed to see the connection between the elements on the table and the community which shares them; between this particular act of communion and what is proclaimed about humanity in and through the entirety of Jesus’ table practice. St Augustine, in an Easter sermon preached on these very texts, makes the connection in a starkly beautiful way:

It was by means of (this bread and wine) that the Lord Christ wished to present us with his body and blood, which he shed for our sake for the forgiveness of sins. If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive.²⁸

For Augustine, unworthy reception is “receiving with contempt, receiving with derision.”²⁹ Koenig, on the other hand, sees things far more in terms of the very specific issues of the Corinthian church: “In [Paul’s] view, confident and casual believers, oblivious to the claims of their less privileged neighbors, are those who will suffer punishment.”³⁰ But even this punishment is thought by Paul to be one of grace, for “when we are judged by the Lord we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world” (1 Cor 11:32).

To summarize, there must be a real integrity between this

²⁸ Sermon 227, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Sermons III 6, John E Rotelle, OSA, ed, Edmund Hill, OP, translator (New Rochell, NY: New City Press, 1993).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Koenig, p. 109.

sharing in the bread and cup and the table fellowship of the community in all that it anticipates and enacts about the Kingdom which Christ proclaimed. There is an argument to be made that Paul assumes here that any community that is sharing communion would consist exclusively of people who have already been initiated by baptism: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13).

This is clearly Augustine’s understanding of these passages, as his sermon was preached to the newly-baptized as an exploration of the sacrament of communion; a group of newly initiated Christians who, prior to their Easter eve baptism, had not even witnessed the full eucharistic liturgy, much less received communion.³¹ It is also a position taken by Farwell in an essay that draws significantly from this Pauline material. “Simply put, baptism is the ritual commitment to the *basileia tou theou* and eucharist is the ritual remembrance in which the commitment to the *basileia tou theou* is nourished.”³² More bluntly, the 17th century Anglican divine Richard Hooker writes, “No man therefore receiveth this sacrament before Baptism, because no dead thing is capable of nourishment.”³³

The reading of the material from 1 Corinthians as advocated by Koenig, Welker and others challenges us to move beyond narrowly individualistic concerns around personal, moral or spiritual worthiness into a position which takes seriously the state of health of the assembled community. For Paul, there is a practical, as well as theological and spiritual, side to this issue. He assumes that there will be outsiders present at these

³¹ Augustine, Sermon 227.

³² Farwell, p. 224 [*basileia tou theou*, literally the “kingdom of God.”].

³³ Richard Hooker in Moeller, p. 87.

meal gatherings (1 Cor 14:23f), and is concerned that they not be put off by any signs of hypocritical disunity on the part of the community. Again, though, it is worth noting that there is significant scholarly disagreement as to whether or not such visitors actually shared in the eucharistic part of the meal.

3. Insights from the Acts of the Apostles

I propose to consider only two sections from Acts; the section on the Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35), and a meal story which comes late in the book (27:27-38) which Koenig has identified as something of a “Proto-Lord’s Supper.”³⁴

What has come to be known as the Council of Jerusalem was convened, according to Luke’s account in Acts, to consider the matter of the inclusion of Gentile believers into the church. The issue was not one of baptism, but rather of circumcision and of the question of whether Gentile believers were required to also become Jews.

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that

³⁴ Koenig, p. 193.

neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’ (Acts 16:6-11)

The line that “there had been much debate” will probably have a ring of authenticity for anyone who has ever sat through a church meeting or synod at which some controversial issue was under discussion! According to Luke, it is at this point that Peter speaks, following which “the whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (15:12). The divisive arguing falls away, as James offers some words from several of the Hebrew prophets, and then renders his decision:

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.’ (Acts 15:19-21)

A letter to Gentile believers is framed summarizing James’ discernment – which was deemed to have been “good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (15:28a) – and the way is opened to the full inclusion of all believers at the table. Of this, Koenig writes, “the Jewish church in Jerusalem has accepted the radical position that God wants Gentile believers to feel altogether welcome at all table rituals of the church, wherever they take place.”³⁵ Now, for all that Luke’s account might suggest a smooth unfolding of this new development, Paul makes it quite clear in Galatians 2:1-14 that even Peter had not been

³⁵ Koenig, p. 189.

entirely able to hold to the Council's ruling. And again, it is probably fair to assume that the ruling has to do with *baptized* Gentile believers, and not with unbaptized guests and visitors to the assembly.

We must not underestimate just how radical this shift was in terms of the opening of the Christian assembly, and of the missional potential of both shared meals and of eucharistic practice. This is all raised in a fascinating manner in the narrative of Paul's sharing of prayer and bread found near the end of Acts. At this point in Acts, Paul has been arrested and is on his way to Rome for trial. The ship that he is on has been caught in a storm, and as this section of the narrative opens, is in its fourteenth night on the open seas.

Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.' After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves. (We were in all two hundred and seventy-six persons in the ship.) After they had satisfied their hunger, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea. (Acts 27:33-38)

Luke's choice of wording here would not have been lost on his original audience, and neither should it be lost on us. The sequence "took bread; gave thanks; broke it; began to eat" echoes more or less directly that of the last supper. Words parallel to the Greek text of the Lukan version of that earlier meal - *labon arton eucharistesas eklasen* (Luke 22:19) - are used here in Acts: *labon arton eucharistesan to theou*; in the former case, "took bread, and when he had given thanks," and in the

latter, “took bread, and gave thanks to God.”

In the words of C.K. Barrett, “As far as the language goes, this is more ‘eucharistic’ than any other passage in Acts... The coincidence in language with that of the Last Supper cannot be missed and can hardly be accidental.”³⁶ What we are faced with here is a kind of eucharistic or “proto-eucharistic” act, in which Paul stands in the midst of a group of pagan Gentiles and offers them hope and courage through this action of taking, blessing, breaking and eating bread. While some question might be raised as to whether they shared in the bread Paul had broken, or were simply inspired to take out food from their own supplies,³⁷ it is frankly difficult to imagine Paul not offering pieces of his own bread to others, particularly when it is clearly intended to be for them a sign not simply of courage, but of their ultimate safety in the presence of the One in whose name the bread is blessed.

Luke understands Paul’s breaking of bread as an act of Divine Providence through which God reaches out to “all peoples,” welcoming them to a foretaste of the feast at the kingdom’s final coming. No commitment to Jesus is required. In Paul’s vision the angel tells him: “God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you (Acts 27:24). But the people themselves cannot believe this good news until they partake of consecrated bread with the apostle, who assures them that it will help them survive [literally: ‘will be for your salvation’] (Acts 27:34).³⁸

³⁶ C.K. Barrett, cited in John Koenig, *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation* (Harrisburg, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2007), p. 117.

³⁷ William Willimon, *Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 184-85.

³⁸ Koenig, *Soul Banquets*, p. 118.

This meal, eaten on a ship in the midst of a storm at a time when it was likely a foolish thing for sailors to be very hopeful about their odds of survival, marked as it is by the sequence of take, give thanks, break, eat, does its work. The sailors are encouraged, and they take food together. With hunger satisfied, they spring into action; in this case a rather meaningless struggle to further lighten the boat's load, but it is hopeful action all the same. By the next morning, the ship has run into a reef, and is in danger of being torn apart. The suggestion is made to kill the prisoners to prevent their escaping, but "wishing to save Paul" (27:43), a centurion intervenes and releases the prisoners into the sea, allowing them to swim for their lives. In the end, all who had been aboard arrive safely on land, just as the angel had earlier promised Paul.

Of all of the texts of the New Testament, this story from Luke may actually make the strongest case for a missiologically-grounded practice of open table. Luke shows Paul as proclaiming something of the nature and character of God in this proto-eucharistic act, and then leaving the growth of whatever seeds may have been sown amongst the sailors and centurions in God's hands. Is it possible to blend this crucial insight with what is revealed both in Jesus' meal practice and in Paul's concerns as voiced in 1 Corinthians, to formulate a case for the practice of open table? A case which acknowledges the fundamental relationships between baptism and eucharist and between the bread that is Christ's body and the community that is the Body of Christ? It is to this that we now turn.

A Changing World

ONE CAN GROW TIRED AT the very mention of the term “postmodern,” in part because of the density of much of the writings of the postmodern intellectual tradition. But even moreso because of how, in some circles of the church, the term is so blithely trotted out as the innovation that will surely remake us as a new, vibrant and relevant entity. Conferences are held, resources published, models for worship marketed and some communities are inspired to initiate “postmodern worship,” complete with icons projected on power-point screens and various trappings that are said to create the right atmosphere for the postmodern seeker.

To offer one concrete example, the resource publisher “emergentYS” advertises its *Worship Image Gallery on CD-ROM* with the claim that it provides “Artistic images that speak the nonlinear language of the growing postmodern church.” The marketing and packaging of so-called postmodern resources actually echoes the orientation of modernity, with its emphasis on developing techniques and creating strategies to produce universally-applicable solutions to problems.

In this sense, the “emergentYS” approach is not markedly different from the seeker-church model of the 1990s, the house-church/cell-group model of the 1980s, or even the Jesus people movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Such a thin apprehension of the language and terms of postmodern thought marks a failure to come to grips with

the significant insights and issues raised by this intellectual movement, and specifically with the notion that we may be living in a profoundly transitional time; one in which we increasingly recognize that the assumptions of modernity are no longer holding, but also in which we are not yet clear as to how they will be replaced, superseded or perhaps even recapitulated.¹

According to Jurgen Habermas, modernity has been shaped by what he called the “Enlightenment project:”

Proponents of the Enlightenment... still held the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would further not only the control of the forces of nature but also the understanding of self and world, moral progress, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness.²

Simply by naming this as “extravagant expectation,” Habermas has named the depths of the increasingly general disenchantment with such ruling assumptions. Identifying what he calls a general “questioning of the central assumptions

¹ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003). David Bentley Hart, in his densely challenging book *The Beauty of the Infinite*, wonders if, “by ‘postmodernity’ we mean simply modernity grown fully self-aware” (p. 44). While Hart welcomes much of what the postmodern intellectual tradition has brought - “forms of ‘antifoundationalism’ and ‘antiessentialism,’ impatience with the dialectics of subjectivity, a sense of the unmasterable deferrals of language” (pp. 7-8) - he remains quite critical of the movement’s prejudices and blind spots, ultimately wondering if its unrelenting emphasis on the inability to say anything meaningful about truth has become its own version of truth; its own “metanarrative.”

² Jurgen Habermas, cited in Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 3.

of the Enlightenment epistemology,” Stanley Grenz identifies the following as being significant indicators of the increasing distrust in modernity’s general view:

1. A general lack of conviction in the notion “that knowledge is inherently good;”
2. A rejection of the assumption “that truth is certain and hence purely rational;”
3. A refusal to accept “the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective;”
4. A corresponding rejection of “the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous knower.”³

Grenz sees these as implying a fairly radical shift in the church’s self-understanding, and so he speaks of the, “grave implications for those who seek to live as Christ’s disciples in the new context.”⁴ In short, if we are going to use the term “postmodern” – and it may be wiser to speak instead in terms of a general social and cultural upheaval, so as to avoid the tiredness of which I wrote above – we need to understand that it implies much more than a new approach to worship and marketing.

Still, a society that increasingly senses it is resting on shifting sands may be one that spurs the church into some creative thinking around how we understand worship and liturgy. Using the term postmodern as descriptive of “the diverse social and cultural phenomena of the mid-to-late Twentieth Century,”⁵ Constance Cherry suggests that this generation, as well as

³ Grenz, pp. 7-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵ Constance Cherry, “Merging Tradition and Innovation in the Life of the Church,” in Todd E. Johnson, ed. *The Conviction of Things Not Seen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), p. 27.

those to follow, “will perceive God through experiencing the transcendence and mystery of God, through story, silence, symbol, color and image.”⁶ Cherry further expects that this will have a distinctly corporate and communal dimension to it, rather unlike the more individualistic piety that has characterized so much of North American Christianity.⁷

While Cherry may be guilty of too neatly reducing the concept of postmodernity to something easily managed, thus allowing her to produce a bit of a template for change in worship, excerpts from saint benedict’s table responses would seem to offer some support as to how she, along with others such as Grenz, imagine things may unfold for the Christian assembly in the coming years:

saint benedict’s table is not forging its identity in what it is not about, but growing people around the experience of what it is about – the table, and the ‘time and time again’ opportunity to experience God’s grace through the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. (S.J.-R.)

Although worship is personal, we have learned community in worship... we are drawn together during worship and now we move in a circle to share a common cup. It is a different space than the one we live in too often. We are hungry for the presence of God in our lives, hungry for knowing and experiencing God, and in open communion and in the whole of worship we are invited to meet God. (A.K.)

In our community we frequently hear the words, ‘This is the Body of Christ: Behold what you are, become what you receive.’ The elements of bread and wine, though private in receipt, also become, by virtue of shared experience, public as the circle is

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

formed around the communion table. The formation of this circle is for me a profound kinesthetic enactment/touchstone of liturgy as 'work' – the building of a common praise experience. This experience is 'built' together with our bodies just as we have built the act of worship with our presence and, with particular vigor in our community, our voices. (L.J.)

*Again and again and again
to this table we come
once a people estranged
now as one in your name
in your mercy and grace
forgiven of all we've confessed
by your body and blood
one last thing we request
to you we pray
Jesus feed us
feed us Jesus
feed us Jesus
with your healing love*

Gord Johnson
Jesus, Feed Us

These are voices from a community that gathers for a liturgy which is rich in sign and symbol – which one respondent described as an “embodied approach; a rhythmic interplay of word, silence and sensate imagery in the icons and art, incense, bells and music.”

It is in worship, says Robert Webber, that “God’s people act out the Christ event and thereby praise, honor, and glorify God.”⁸ It is through worship, built around what Koenig calls

⁸ Robert Webber, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship: Volume 2 – Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), p. 396.

“its liturgies of messianic feasting,”⁹ that the early church was both galvanized in its vision and commitments and released into its vigorous missions. Those house gatherings were an exploratory point of contact for the visitor and the curious which, as I suggested above, is part of what so troubles Paul about the Corinthian situation: the hypocrisy would have been quite apparent to newcomers, such that even if the communion itself was not open, the common meal and the community itself must have been.

Clearly, then, there was and is an evangelizing dimension to eucharistic worship, which is at least part of what Paul communicates when he says, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11:26) Proclaim to whom? To ourselves certainly, but not only to ourselves. Our eucharistic liturgies are *kerygmatic*¹⁰ events which tell the truth about God, ourselves and the world. Still, for all of this, as one of our respondents rightly pointed out:

...the primary purpose of public worship is not evangelism; rather it is to praise, glorify, worship and learn of God, the pinnacle of which is the memorial of the body and blood.
(G.G.)

To design liturgies, eucharistic or otherwise, which are aimed primarily at the conversion of non-believers, is to fashion something that runs the risk of becoming more about persuasive communication than about the worship of the triune God. To create such liturgies, using “relevance” as the trump card, is

⁹ Koenig, p. 104.

¹⁰ From the Greek word *kerygma*, meaning literally “preaching.” In a theological context, to refer to a kerygmatic event is to note that act’s character as being something which proclaims that which is true.

even more risky, making liturgy “a means to an end rather than an opportunity to encounter God.”¹¹ While it is easy to point a finger at the high tech mega-churches with their multi-media presentations and “AOR” (adult-oriented radio) influenced worship bands, it is no less true in the instance of the grand cathedral with paid choir that actively markets itself to the music world as offering a fine tradition of sung masses and choral evensong.

Yet William Tully may be right when he suggests, “the basic place you would start to build a strategy for Church growth that is consistent with Anglican spirituality is the liturgy, and the openness by which the invitation to participation is made.”¹² Notice the phrase “consistent with Anglican spirituality,” which implies, among other things, a sense that worship is primarily just that: worship. It also, if we take our heritage at all seriously, implies something about boundaries and accountability. On this point, Farwell is extremely helpful:

It is not exclusionary to restrict that meal to those who commit themselves to anticipatory practice of the kingdom: to the contrary, one can argue that it is disingenuous to offer this meal as if it requires nothing but the desire to participate out of curiosity, custom, or an unformed sense of spiritual longing, however sincere.¹³

It should be noted that “custom” is listed here along with “curiosity” and “spiritual longing.” We are, with that word, beyond a simplistic rule that suggests that baptism is the required and sufficient ground for participation in

¹¹ Moeller, p. 82.

¹² William Tully, “Church Growth and Anglican Spirituality,” *The Anglican*. Vol 26, #3, July 1997, p. 8.

¹³ Farwell, p. 224.

eucharist. It may be one's custom to wander up the street for midnight mass on Christmas Eve, but if that is the only point of engagement with Christian worship – with any “anticipatory practice of the kingdom” – is that not more rightly labeled “disingenuous” than is the offer of an open table to professing Christians not yet baptized, or even to honest seekers who are prepared to explore seriously the life of faith with us?

The Invitation

I WOULD HERE INVITE THE reader to take an unexpected detour, and to read George Herbert's poem, "The Invitation," written as a reflection on the Exhortations in the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*:

Come ye hither all, whose taste
Is your waste;
Save your cost, and mend your fare.
God is here prepar'd and drest,
And the feast,
God, in whom all dainties are.

Come ye hither all, whom wine
Doth define,
Naming you not to your good:
Weep what ye have drunk amisse,
And drink this,
Which before ye drink is bloud.

Come ye hither all, whom pain
Doth arraigne,
Bringing all your sinnes to sight:
Taste and fear not: God is here
In this cheer,
And on sinne doth cast the fright.

Come ye hither all, whom joy
Doth destroy,

While ye graze without your bounds:
 Here is joy that drowneth quite
 Your delight,
 As a froud the lower grounds.

Come ye hither all, whose love
 Is your dove,
 And exalts you to the skie:
 Here is love, which having breath
 Ev'n in death,
 After death can never die.

Lord I have invited all,
 And I shall
 Still invite, still call to thee:
 For it seems but just and right
 In my sight,
 Where is all, there all should be.

George Herbert
The Temple, 1633

There are three Exhortations in the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*, all of which strike typical 21st century worshippers as being rather stern, even condemning.¹ Geared to an age when infrequent celebration of communion was at risk of becoming the norm in the English church, the rubrics of the prayer book instruct that on the Sunday or holy day immediately preceding a celebration of communion the minister should read aloud one of the first two Exhortations. The first is addressed to those who might come too casually to receive communion, and

¹ While Herbert's poem of 1633 was written with the Exhortations of the 1559 Book of Common Prayer in view, I will reference the 1662 edition, as this is the version used by Rowan Williams in his essay "Imagining the Kingdom," which is dealt with in some detail below.

includes warnings such as:

Therefore if any of you be a blasphemer of God, an hinderer or slanderer of His Word, an adulterer, or be in malice, or envy, or in any other grievous crime, Repent you of your sins, or else come not to that holy Table; lest, after the taking of that holy Sacrament, the Devil enter into you, as he entered into Judas, and fill you full of all iniquities, and bring you to destruction both of body and soul.

According to Rowan Williams, the text of this first Exhortation, “assumes that a major obstacle to worthy reception is publicly visible sin against a neighbor.”² “Or, to put the point another way,” Williams continues:

The relations between persons that are of pertinence to their share in Christ’s Body are not abstract, nor are they restricted to the liturgical event. What can be seen in human relations outside the event of worship is allowed to ‘invade’ the language of liturgy.³

The second Exhortation is aimed at congregations marked by a reticence to participate in communion, a reticence that we might not find all that surprising, given the content of the first Exhortation. Here, though, what is in view is the tendency, in part shaped by centuries of the medieval practice of eucharistic adoration, for people to attend services, to listen and observe as communion was celebrated, yet to receive only infrequently. This second Exhortation draws on the imagery of Matthew’s version of the parable of the wedding banquet (Matt 22:1-10), including the uniquely Matthaen tones of retribution:

² Rowan Williams, “Imagining the Kingdom,” in Kenneth Stevenson and Bryan Spinks, eds. *The Identity of Anglican Worship* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Wherefore, most dearly beloved in Christ, take ye good heed, lest ye, withdrawing yourselves from this holy Supper, provoke God's indignation against you.

As if the use of one or another of these Exhortations was not quite enough, a third Exhortation is set out for use on the Sunday of the communion itself. Again, the language is strong and uncompromising, with a clear focus on the *danger* of receiving unworthily.

For then we are guilty of the Body and Blood of Christ our Saviour; we eat and drink our own damnation, not considering the Lord's Body; we kindle God's wrath against us; we provoke him to plague us with divers diseases, and sundry kinds of death. Judge therefore yourselves, brethren, that ye be not judged of the Lord.

While it may not be obvious from these selected quotes, the Exhortations are actually marked by a considerable emphasis on mercy and grace. Whether the presenting congregational problem is one of an overly casual approach to the table – one in which the actual shape of one's life is disconnected from the receiving of the sacrament – or of a reticence to participate in the liturgy by actually receiving communion – which signals a different sort of disconnect of life from worship – the remedy is located in a turn toward God's mercy.

There is much in this material that our ears, much more accustomed to hearing more narrowly of the love of God, will find alien.⁴ Yet behind the apparent severity of the Exhortations

⁴ The invitation to confession in the Scottish Liturgy of 1982 embodies a spirit far more comfortable for people of this era: "God is love and we are his children. There is no room for fear in love.

lies both an important challenge and an open invitation. They are so important that Williams wonders if we might be wise to create something like an exhortation in our new liturgies “as a general statement setting out the responsibility entailed in responding to God’s gracious invitation.”⁵

The challenge, of course, is to bring the words of belief into a place of integrity with one’s life, and to take seriously the call to be accountable before God for who and what we are. The invitation – and here we begin to return to Herbert’s poem – is to be prepared to leave behind all that encumbers us and to come to the communion table; perhaps even to come with all of our doubts, uncertainties and wrestlings; our beliefs and longings to believe; our oftentimes unarticulated hungers; and to experience there a release from that which binds us.

As the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* is set out, it is quite possible to imagine someone moving from a place of conviction under the demands and claims of that third Exhortation, into repentance through the general confession, and finally to come, by grace, to the table; all this within the context of a single eucharistic liturgy. From the table, the movement is onward into the rest of life, renewed and strengthened in one’s commitments and confirmed in the knowledge of being one of the beloved of God. This may be no easy thing. As

We love because he loved us first.
Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith.”

Of course, it can be asked as to whether this liturgical text does any justice to a substantial theology of the Divine love or of the fear of God. These are all lines taken from 1 John, but without the context of the whole of that epistle, they come across in a very particular way. One thing is quite certain: this invitation to confession does not share the theological world view of the Exhortations.

⁵ Williams, p. 11.

James Farwell has it, “the table is a place of radical hospitality and celebration *but also* [italics in original] a share in Christ’s cup of suffering.”⁶ Or to return one final time to Williams’ poignant essay:

And if we doubt our worthiness to belong in the company, then, as the first Exhortation has told us, we know what to do about it: it is in our hands to repair the breaches of justice and charity which have made us unworthy.⁷

Still, this demanding cup, which calls us so clearly into a place of accountability in our relationships and to our neighbours, is our most needful thing. Herbert sees this with great clarity. The invitation is issued to all who would hear, whether their burden is an idolatry of food or drink, sex or the high life - whether or not they bear a wound of pain - the invitation is open. And then Herbert’s closing prayer:

Lord I have invited all,
 And I shall
 Still invite, still call to thee:
 For it seems but just and right
 In my sight
 Where is all, there all should be.

From Herbert’s 17th century English perspective, doubtless this “all” still implied persons duly baptized in the Church of England, yet his reading of the expansiveness of grace and mercy implicit in the Exhortations should not escape notice. Where else should the broken or the lost or the searching be, but at this table, “where is all?” What is implied in the first five verses of the poem, however, is that in accepting the invitation one is risking trading the familiar pains and vices in exchange

⁶ Farwell, p. 230.

⁷ Williams, p. 4.

for something hardier and truer. In reflecting on the necessary and symbiotic tension between the announcement of the gift of life and the call for a real response, Farwell observes, “The call without the gift is damaging moralism and law; the gift without the call is ‘cheap grace’ and moral license.”⁸

It is in this dynamic tension that saint benedict’s table seeks to live its eucharistic life. While our practice is fairly described as “open table,” the gospel that is both preached in word and embodied in liturgy is not one of cheap grace. Deep claims are made on the lives of worshippers, including those who are attending out of simple curiosity. And while we do not read aloud the Exhortations, unlike the pattern in many self-styled progressive or liberal parishes, we always include some form of confession and absolution. A fair portion of the original music produced from within our community has, if not a penitential tone, certainly a self-evaluative and searching quality. In the fall of 2006 we began to use an invitation to communion, adapted from the worship book of the Iona Community:

This is the table, not merely of the church, but of
Christ
It is made ready for those who love him
and for those who want to love him more.
So come, whether you have much faith or little;
have tried to follow,
or are afraid you have failed.
Come, because it is Christ who invites you.
It is his will that those who want to meet him might
meet him here.⁹

After the first few Sundays on which this invitation was used,

⁸ Farwell, p. 231.

⁹ Adapted from a prayer in the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, Wild Goose Publications, 2001

Gord Johnson wrote a sung version, which is now used on an occasional basis:

*This is the table of Christ
He stands here arms open wide
Calling your name
Make no mistake
It's you he invites*

*You who are weary come, come
You who are hungry come, come
If you would follow Him come, come
If you have failed Him come, come
Come to the table
Jesus would meet you here
Come, come*

*All who are joyful come, come
All who are broken down come, come
If you have faith come, come
If you have none come, come
Come to the table
Jesus would meet you here
Come, come*

Gord Johnson,
“*This is the Table of Christ*”

The cumulative impact of all of this – the contemplative style of much of our music, extended periods of silence, confession, songs that express themes of search and self-honesty as we seek God, an invitation that speaks both of the fear of failure and of faith and love – is to shape a people who are not likely to come forward to the table out of simple curiosity or even indifferent custom. Is there a condition or requirement? Only

an acknowledgment of hunger.¹⁰

I am weary

I am weak

I am thirsty

All you said was

Come to me

Come to me (3x)

All you said was come to me

I am haunted

I am so vain

I am filthy

All you said was

Come to me

Come to me...

I said you're nothing

I said I'm alright

I said I hate you

All you said was

Come to me

Come to me...

Mike Koop
 "Come to Me"

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest," invites Jesus in Matthew

¹⁰ This phrase is taken from the reflections of one of our respondents: "One requirement only – hunger. Hunger for more love, more faith, more intimacy, more grace, more 'at-home-ness,' more connectedness with all of life. And above all, meeting the Christ that I had loved as a child, both within my own being, and among this wonderful group of fellow-travelers, who, I suspected, had their own very personal reasons for coming here, to this particular table; others who were also hungry for... something."

11:28. Come with your hungers and burdens and exhaustion and wounds. Come and be reshaped into what you were intended to be; not by first perfecting the self, but by bringing the self in all of its imperfections. In his *Holy Sonnet XVIII*, John Donne pushes our sensibilities even further than does Herbert, offering a most startling image of the church as fulfilling its vocation through being promiscuously open and loving of all who would accept the invitation to enter in. The sonnet is written into a social and political context in which the church is still very much reeling from the rifts between its Roman Catholic and Protestant forms, and enmeshed (“in Germany and here”) in the destruction of the Thirty Years’ War.¹¹

Show me, dear Christ, Thy Spouse, so bright and clear.
 What! is it She, which on the other shore
 Goes richly painted? or which rob’d and tore
 Laments and mourns in Germany and here?
 Sleeps she a thousand, then peeps up one year?
 Is she self truth and errs? now new, now outwore?
 Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore
 On one, on seven, or on no hill appear?
 Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights
 First travail we to seek and then make Love?
 Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,
 And let mine amorous soul court thy mild Dove,
 Who is most true, and pleasing to thee, then
 When she is embrac’d and open to most men.

John Donne
Holy Sonnet XVIII

It is in these last few lines, when Donne compares the Bride of

¹¹ David L. Edwards, *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 242-243.

Christ to a wife encouraged by her own husband to be sexually promiscuous, that the reader is awakened to the audacity of the idea of a Saviour whose will it is to draw *all* to him. In an age when church affiliation came with deep and divisive social and political consequences, Donne dared to imagine a church so comprehensive and open that it could accommodate and make room for *all* in the midst of violent division. It was, in Donne's view, Christ's will that his Bride be that open.

Yet what of baptism? In particular, what of baptismal *regeneration*, and of the marking of the newly baptized "as Christ's own forever?" A reflection by one of our respondents reframed this in a most helpful manner:

The Great Commission calls us to make disciples, baptizing and teaching. Could it be that for our age, the experience of learning and being taught sequenced by the writer of the conclusion of Matthew's gospel is more global than linear? Perhaps an immersion of experience is the baptism required first these days. (L.J.)

"An immersion of experience" as a kind of proto-baptism is a fascinating concept, not entirely unlike the ancient church's position on the "baptism of desire;" of recognizing as baptized those who had begun the long preparation for baptism but who had died before its culmination. The notion that the body of Christ might not be ontologically limited by the act of baptism has, in other words, some precedent. At each eucharist at saint benedict's table we use a sentence at the breaking of the bread drawn from one of Augustine's baptismal sermons:

This is the body of Christ:
 behold what you are
 become what you receive.
 Amen.¹²

¹² Adapted from Sermon 272 of "Sermons on the Liturgical

While for Augustine this is clearly a sentence that could only be proclaimed to a community of the baptized, it does embody a theology of movement and experience: by doing this together, you will together become this. In our practice, this sentence becomes both an invitation and a challenge. In the words of one respondent, we are challenged:

...to 'become' even when we know we have failed, and extended the constant opportunity to come and be reminded that even in our desiring we have come closer. (A.K.)

These explorations are clearly not unique to saint benedict's table, nor are they narrowly eucharistic issues. Tim Keel, pastor of Jacob's Well in St Louis, suggests that in its approach to evangelism and formation, his community has reversed the conventional order of things: "If most evangelicals follow a pattern of believe-behave-belong, we reverse that pattern and make it belong-behave-believe. We say, 'Try on these clothes, take up these practices, and see what happens.'" ¹³ The unbaptized person (or should that be the not-yet-baptized?) learns, absorbs, draws closer, experiences by actually doing this thing with the community; in the words of evangelist and writer Harold Percy, they "act their way into new ways of believing."¹⁴

The table at saint benedict's reminds me very much of the stories that talk about a stable family whose oldest son invites a friend over for dinner. Regardless of the guest's background

Seasons."

¹³ Tim Keel quoted in Jason Byassee, "Emerging Model: a visit to Jacob's Well," *The Christian Century*, September 19, 2006, Vol. 123, No. 19, p. 23.

¹⁴ Harold Percy in a personal communication to the writer, March 29, 2007.

or situation, the person is accepted for who they are and for what they contribute to the dinner table. More often than not, the said dinner encounter has had a significant impact on both parties, most notably on the guest, who walks away impacted in a way that leaves him longing for more of what he has experienced. (B.S.)

I go to saint benedict's table because it has said a resounding "yes" to me. It is the first place where I have yet to apologize for my intensity, aggravation, despair, hopelessness, and naiveté. I have not felt the need to say "yes" when I meant "no." I have not been told "later" or "we'll see." Instead, I hear, "now" and "we're seeing." saint ben's is a community which exists in the persistent and gruesome reality of each moment, it is a church of today; experience, learning, and reshaping as now turns into now turns into now... We draw from history, and we hope for a delicious future, but without the false perception of present progression, gain, or definitive knowledge. We gather to ask, wonder, scream, create, hold, bleed, sigh and remember.

(J.M.)

To adhere to the traditional requirements for communion participation may well marginalize people (the seeker, the prodigal, the sinner) from being embraced in the community and moving forward in their faith journey. To see the 'embrace' in action, I think of two situations in particular. For sure one of those people is not of Christian background, and I suspect the other is in the same category. Yet they feel accepted within the community, and are growing day by day in their understanding. (L.W.)

This issue of "growing day by day" is anything but incidental. In fact, one of the concerns flagged by John Koenig during the course of our conversation was that, at least in his experience, the communities that emphasize open table are inclined to have a fairly slim practice of baptism; that perhaps there is

a case to be made for having participation in communion precede baptism, but not at the cost of a diminished theology of baptism.¹⁵ In very much the same vein, one of our respondents offered the following comment:

One might hope that over time an unbaptized communicant may be drawn to see the need of committing to the promises and sacrament of baptism as a wholesome part of their faith journey. (G.G.)

Indeed, more than just “hope,” for though the direction of flow between baptism and eucharist may be allowed to vary in our practice, the connection remains. By belonging in this circle, and by sharing with us in all that we do, you will be schooled in this faith; and to be so schooled is to be on the way to baptism. It is just that we will make room for some to “loiter with intent,”¹⁶ or, to pick up on the image offered by Thomas Bandy, to enter and re-enter through the porous boundary between this church and its surrounding environs. In Bandy’s view, thriving churches have a clear vision to the front, values and commitments anchoring the sides, but a completely fluid back boundary wall which allows the seeker, the alienated, the outsider and the “other” to slip through quietly and to be one with the community.

Points of entry into church life are everywhere. The public is coming and going, exploring and experimenting with church life all the time. One does not have to start with a visitor’s card in the church service, and proceed through specified membership training classes, in order to be wholeheartedly in the church... (and) if suddenly hesitant

¹⁵ Personal interview with John Koenig at General Theological Seminary, New York, January 25, 2007.

¹⁶ A phrase borrowed from Richard Giles, p. 105.

or overwhelmed, they can back away again.¹⁷

Is that person ready, willing or desiring to come to the front, far from the porous wall, where this community comes into a circle to become even more what we receive? This community, while fundamentally hospitable, will not dumb down for the sake of relevance, nor will it mince words as to the risky thing that we do in asking to be more deeply formed as the Body of Christ.

Arguing for the traditional pattern, including an extended and extensive baptismal preparation process, Farwell wonders, "... is not the longing of the catechumen, when baptized and fed, more fully satisfied and yet more prepared for the long journey of continuing desire that is the Christian life?"¹⁸

While I would agree with his characterization of God's gift given through the church as being "both utterly free and [yet one which] costs not less than everything,"¹⁹ and am even prepared to agree that such long-haul faith requires long-haul formation, I do not agree that the best or only way to do this is according to the conventional model. Our experience has been one in which faith is practiced, hands-on, through a full invitation to participate in this body in all of its wonder and all of its grace and all of its power to undo us and remake us. We will always open the circle a bit wider to admit the one person who is wishing to meet this transforming and subversive Christ.

¹⁷ Thomas G. Bandy, *Kicking Habits* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), p. 148.

¹⁸ Farwell, p. 235.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

* * * * *

While much in this study remains unfinished, there is one issue in particular that requires additional reflection: that of departing from the canons and/or normative practices of the church. While the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada has no canon on eucharist or baptism, the same is not true in the Episcopal Church in the United States, where the practice of open table places communities in violation of the canons. In spite of his own opposition to open table, Farwell generously notes that:

...precisely because they encode the broad outlines of our theology in some matters, we sometimes bend the canons under the pressure of new and noteworthy theological considerations as our understanding of the gospel develops and the context for ministry places new demands upon us.²⁰

However, as noted in the beginning of this book, he also speaks of the “defiance” of the canons by “a handful of high profile parishes,” which suggests Farwell is seeing here something other than a *bending* of canons for the purpose of exploration. Leigh Axton Williams suggests that in so many ways the church – and here he is reflecting very specifically on the experience of the American church – has “imported” a secular and highly individualistic view of law into how it tends to approach canon law, most often viewing it, “... as divorced from the living community of faith rather than... as an integral part of our common life, a means by which we govern ourselves and our relationships with other people.”²¹

²⁰ Farwell, p. 218

²¹ Leigh Axton Williams, “Reflections on Canon Law and

If a parish then decides that it disagrees with the canons, it simply pleads something like, “we are the real and living church of Christ, and your rules are designed to restrain us.” One can sense some of this in Richard Fabian’s paper, where he writes, “history shows that rules contradicting Jesus as he is known in any age will not work in his church, and must inevitably fall.”²²

While in the Canadian context we do not have such canons to concern us respecting the relationship between baptism and communion, we do live under Canon XIV on *The Book of Common Prayer*, and that book does have some things to say on the issue. Not least, the *Solemn Declaration of 1893* commits the church:

...to hold and maintain the Doctrine, Sacraments, and Discipline of Christ as the Lord hath commanded in his Holy Word, and as the Church of England hath received and set forth the same in ‘The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, according to the use of the Church of England; together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, pointed as they are to be sung or said in Churches; and the Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons; and in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion; and to transmit the same unimpaired to our posterity.

In 1893, no one would have questioned that what was “received and set forth” included an assumption that the unbaptized could not receive communion. In the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England, baptism is identified as

Liturgical Revision: Fostering a *Novus Habitus Mentis* in the Episcopal Church,” in Marshall and Northrup, p. 59.

²² Fabian, “First the Table, then the Font.”

the means by which we “rightly are grafted into the Church,” while communion is both “a sign of the love Christians ought to have among themselves one to another” and “a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ’s death.”²³ Quite clearly, the Articles assume a linear relationship between the two, such that there was no need to spell it out explicitly. In Anglican practice, confirmation traditionally acted as a kind of bridge between the two, as is evidenced by the rubric on page 561 of the 1962 Canadian *Book of Common Prayer*:

And there shall none be admitted to holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed.

This is echoed in a rubric from the service of Holy Communion, which advises that, “It is the duty of every confirmed person, after due preparation, to partake of holy Communion frequently.” There has, of course, been an allowance for a shift in this practice with the 1973 Canadian House of Bishops guidelines for the reception of communion by children (now twice revised). To revisit Farwell’s phrase, allowances are made “as our understanding of the gospel develops and the context for ministry places new demands upon us.”²⁴ The implementation of these guidelines still falls under the jurisdiction of the diocesan bishop, who is the chief liturgical officer of the church in his or her diocese, though there has been an agreement that a child admitted to communion in one parish or diocese will not then be denied in another. In short, it is quite possible to make changes in our practice even if it overrides the practice assumed or set forth in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Two phrases are bound to come up at this point, and they

²³ Article xxviii

²⁴ Farwell, p. 218.

are rather fraught with added meaning at this juncture of the church's life due to the complex debates around the blessing of same-sex unions: "local option" and "development of doctrine." On the question of the development of doctrine, the following paragraphs from *The St Michael Report* may be illuminating:

13. The history of Christian theology demonstrates that over time doctrines have developed and changed. Some such developments are viewed as true and some as false. Christians know that doctrine can and does change, but the Church also affirms that such development may never contradict the heart of the gospel. When true development occurs, it ultimately has healthy consequences for the life of the Church.

14. For example, in the early centuries of Christianity, baptism was the sacrament of spiritual rebirth into the Body of Christ, but it was also seen to be the primary if not sole means of forgiveness for profound spiritual disobedience and sin. This early understanding in the tradition led to the common practice of adults delaying baptism until their latter years, or even their deathbed, to avoid falling into sin after baptism without having recourse to forgiveness. In time, repentance, confession, and absolution developed as doctrines in the Church in their own right, but only as the Church was led by the Holy Spirit to a progressive refinement of the role of baptism in the Christian life.

15. For those who maintain that right teaching upholds what was always believed everywhere by all Christians, it needs to be said that conservation of the old is not necessarily the best way to preserve the truth. Furthermore, it is wrong to think that there is no place for originality in the consideration of revealed truth. As new situations and human problems arise, creativity in

the rearticulation of traditional doctrine can be part of the voice of divine wisdom. It must also be noted that development of doctrine in a divided Church can lead to further fragmentation, as one part of the Body of Christ discerns a legitimate development that another cannot recognize. As our experience of the Reformation reminds us, when the Church wrestles with a development of doctrine, it can be a painful, lengthy, and even violent process.²⁵

As for “local option,” Fabian’s observations are quite helpful, though perhaps sweepingly optimistic: “[I]n our time the Anglican communion has followed a more primitive and natural reform process, of testing changes in local use before promoting them widely and legally. Our newer alternative rites largely result from that testing.”²⁶

A bishop, or perhaps even the House of Bishops, is wise to allow for exceptions to normative practice, as part of the process of testing and discerning significant change and potential development. This, of course, must be in keeping with the spirit of Article XX of the Thirty-nine Articles, which says that:

... it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God’s Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.

If this study has been at all successful in demonstrating that there is no overwhelming biblical warrant against an open

²⁵ *Report of the Primate’s Theological Commission of the Anglican Church of Canada on the Blessing of Same-Sex Union: The St Michael Report* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2005), pp. 14-15.

²⁶ Fabian, “First the Table, then the Font.”

table, and that there are strong currents in support thereof, the spirit of the article is left intact. That a bishop entrusts a community with the responsibility to test and try an innovation – at least in part on behalf of the wider church – is very much in tune with the polity of Anglicanism. Unlike cases wherein a combative stance is assumed by the proponents of an extraordinary practice such as open table, this path is more likely to result in change and development that can unfold naturally and self-critically.

I would like to end this study with a piece written by one of our respondents as he reflected on the experience of being invited to an open table. Here the writer is able to identify not merely a hospitable and open welcome – which is of itself no small thing by gospel standards – but also a call to transformation and an invitation to see beyond the life-denying boundaries which are so steadily placed before us in a fragmented world. In this, he clearly echoes Jurgen Moltmann who, when asked what the Christian should be doing locally to live out the gospel, answered simply “Revitalize the audacity of hope.”²⁷

Those of us who rebelled during our youth, certain in our young arrogance that we knew a better way existed even if we couldn't yet find it...

Those of us who continue to rebel as we age, not yet ready to give up the certainty that a better way exists, even if we can't yet find it...

Those of us who come to know how finite life can be, how limited our resources really are, how fast plans and dreams turn to malaise and dust...

We're the people who feel most at home at saint benedict's.

²⁷ Jurgen Moltmann, in answer to a question posed at the 37th Trinity Institute Theological Conference, New York City, January 24, 2007.

*This is where we hear the message from the margin.
This is where we are called from the trodden way to the side of
the road.*

*This is where we're caught off-guard, because we've come
ready to defend, but instead find ourselves beckoned.*

*For the first time in our lives we can join a great conspiracy.
Finally we can be part of a collective act, instead of standing
aside.*

Finally we belong.

*Here, raising a cup and breaking bread becomes an act of
defiance, a challenge to the world of mediocrity, capitulation
and limited horizons.*

*Here joining in a circle is where a spiritual nomad pitches a
tent.*

*Here, what has been freely given to the church is freely given
to those who want to belong.*

Together we are finding that a better way exists. (B.R.)